

Education benefits largest parrot colony

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As *PsittaScene* readers may know, we have been conducting a study on the breeding biology of Patagonian Conures (*Cyanoliseus patagonus*), also known as Burrowing Parrots, since 1998 at the largest and most important colony of this species. The colony, which appears to be the largest known colony of parrots in the world, is located west of the village El Cóndor, 30km southeast from Viedma, in the province of Río Negro, Patagonia, Argentina.

This extraordinary natural heritage, the largest known parrot colony of the world, has been seriously threatened in many ways (see *PsittaScene* Vol 15 No 4: 12-13 and *PsittaScene* Vol 16 No 2: 7-9). The list of past and present threats is long and worrying: poisoning of sectors of the colony with Endrin (or DDT) in an attempt to reduce the number of parrots, sectors of the cliff with the colony dynamited for the building of a pedestrian and car access to the beach below the cliff, clearance of vegetation on top of the cliff with the use

of big machinery, disturbances produced by cars and races along the beach below the cliff, aggression from tourists towards adult Burrowing Parrots bringing food to the nestlings, illegal shooting of parrots by tourists during the holiday season just for entertainment, local farmers shooting parrots during the breeding season on their private land supposedly to protect crops, illegal poaching, illegal hunting, urban expansion, and unregulated paragliding along the breeding cliff. The colony lacks legal protection and until now, our fieldwork was the only protection this colony has against illegal poachers and irrational local management.

Since 2003, we have been promoting the importance and necessity of protection of the colony among local people and the national and international community. The former through an educational campaign targeted to children at local primary schools, the latter through divulgation articles in conservation journals. As we announced in *PsittaScene* Vol 16 No 4: 16, an educational campaign was carried out in primary schools of Viedma, El Cóndor and San Javier (province Río Negro, Patagonia,



One of the road signs guiding the tourist to the colony.

Argentina). Generous donations from the World Parrot Trust, the WPT - Spain, Rosemary Low (WPT - UK) and Franziska Vogel (WPT - Switzerland) made it possible (see also *PsittaScene* Vol 16 No 4: 16). In 2004, Verónica Seijas, a local teacher in charge of the lectures, gave thirty-two lectures to local children between the ages of 8 and 12. A total of 668 children attended the lectures. A short video clip about the colony at El Cóndor, the breeding behavior and the daily activities of Burrowing Parrots was

Photo: Don Preisler



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Despite our conservation efforts, some of the threats persist. Just as a very worrying example, last February, some federal authorities of Argentina (in charge of the programme Elé, which harvests Blue-



A guided visit to the colony during nests controls.

All Photos: Juan Masello

produced and shown in the primary schools as a complementary educational material to the lectures that Verónica gave. The video clip also alerted the children about the threats faced by the colony and the necessity of their help to protect it. The reaction of the children was almost immediate. A few days after the first lecture at El Cóndor, children of that school proposed Verónica to start themselves an educational campaign for the tourists visiting the village and the colony. They designed simple posters alerting the tourists and the local community about the parrot colony, their feelings about it, its immense value and necessity of protection. Since last October, these posters have been displayed in local shops of El Cóndor and effectively attracted the attention of the public, locals and tourists.

During the last breeding season, a total of 230 children attending schools in poor neighborhoods of Viedma and San Javier participated in guided visits to the Burrowing Parrots colony at El Cóndor. Verónica describes those guided visits as 'full of strong emotions'. Most children knew nothing about the parrot colony (although they knew many techniques of how to capture the birds in the fields) and many of them saw the Atlantic Ocean for the first time during the visit to the colony. The coast is only 30km from their school and homes! One of the strongest experiences was when one of these children, who suffered serious abuse from his parents, told Verónica after visiting the colony that he was going to immediately release his pet parrot because 'my parrot is



Verónica and the children at a rural school.

going to feel better here at the colony; my parrot is for sure missing its mum'.

Another highlight of the educational campaign 2004 was the day Verónica gave a lecture at a rural school. She was expecting to find a lot of resistance to the parrots and the idea of protecting them. Farmers of the region consider the Burrowing Parrots a serious pest to be persecuted and eliminated if possible. But the sons and daughters of those farmers think different. They told Verónica that thanks to the Burrowing Parrots and their

loud calls early in the morning they know exactly when is time to go to school!

As a result of a joint initiative of the World Parrot Trust (main contributor), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Fundación Patagonia Natural (Argentina), the Wildlife Division of Río Negro and Aves Argentinas (member of BirdLife International), four road signs advertising the parrot colony were set up at the start of the tourist season at the major roads of El Cóndor. Two of the signs guide the tourists to the colony and the other two provide information regarding the breeding biology of the species and the main features of the colony. The first of these two information signs is located close to the recently opened Tourist Information Center at El Cóndor and the second one in the vicinity of the colony. The road signs turned out very popular and effective, attracting an extensive coverage by the local and national media, in particular the national TV.

Also in order to divulge the importance and necessity of legal protection of the Burrowing Parrot colony at El Cóndor we gave two lectures during last fieldwork at El Cóndor. The first one, on 08/12/04, was given at the university in Viedma (Universidad Nacional del Comahue) and organized by the members of the Association of Tourist Guides of Viedma. The second one, on 07/01/05, was given at the local library of El Cóndor and organized by the library members. Both lectures were very popular and many people assisted.



One of the posters made by the children of El Cóndor.

As a result of the educational campaigns

2003 (by Fundación Uñopatun, see *PsittaScene* Vol 16 No 2: 7-9) and 2004 and an intensive contact with local authorities we observed considerable progress, at a level of the understanding of the local people as well as in the preparation of direct measures in conservation. For a part of the local population, the parrots have now a completely new meaning: instead of a noisy nuisance, they are interesting and intelligent creatures worth protecting. This is shown in initiatives that children and adults are developing. For some people, the prospect of eco-tourism as a way of adding value to the colony is convincing. On the other hand, we have recently achieved support across a wide spectrum of authorities, which allowed us to enter an Act proposal at the provincial Parliament of Río Negro for the legal protection of the colony in form of a "Natural Monument". We wrote the Act proposal with the help of Daniel Paz Barreto, Claudio Chehébar (National Parks Administration, Argentina), Mauricio Failla (Wildlife Division, Río Negro) and Luis Castelli (Fundación Patagonia Natural). The proposal was then re-structured by two representatives of the provincial Parliament of Río Negro, Luis Di Giacomo and José Luis Rodríguez, who finally presented the proposal on 29/12/04. This Act proposal is going to be considered by the provincial Parliament of Río Negro during 2005.

The educational campaign 2005 also involved the design and uploading of a new Web page of the Burrowing Parrot Project. The new Web page is in English and Spanish in order to reach both the international and the local public. Through *PsittaScene*, we would like to invite you to visit our new Web page:
<http://vowa.orn.mpg.de/mitarbeiter/masello/>

We also would like to thank Georgina Strange (New I. South, Falkland Is.) for the design and Wolfgang Fiedler (Max Planck Institute for Ornithology, Vogelwarte Radolfzell, Germany) for providing the Web space. New donations of the WPT will enable Verónica to continue with the lectures in 2005 in Viedma, El Cándor and



An interview at the most important broadcasting station in Río Negro.



One of the road signs providing information about the colony and the parrots.

San Javier. We expect to soon get official permits for extending the educational campaign this year to the nearby city of Carmen de Patagones in the province of Buenos Aires. And we will conduct more guided visits during next breeding season in October-December.

We hope that we will remember the year 2005 as the year in which the legal protection of the colony was achieved giving us the opportunity of generating a management plan that ensures the future of the largest parrot colony of the world! We will keep you updated.

Photo: Jamie Gilardi

